
Opening Extract from...

The House of the Dead

Siberian Exile Under the Tsars

Written by Daniel Beer

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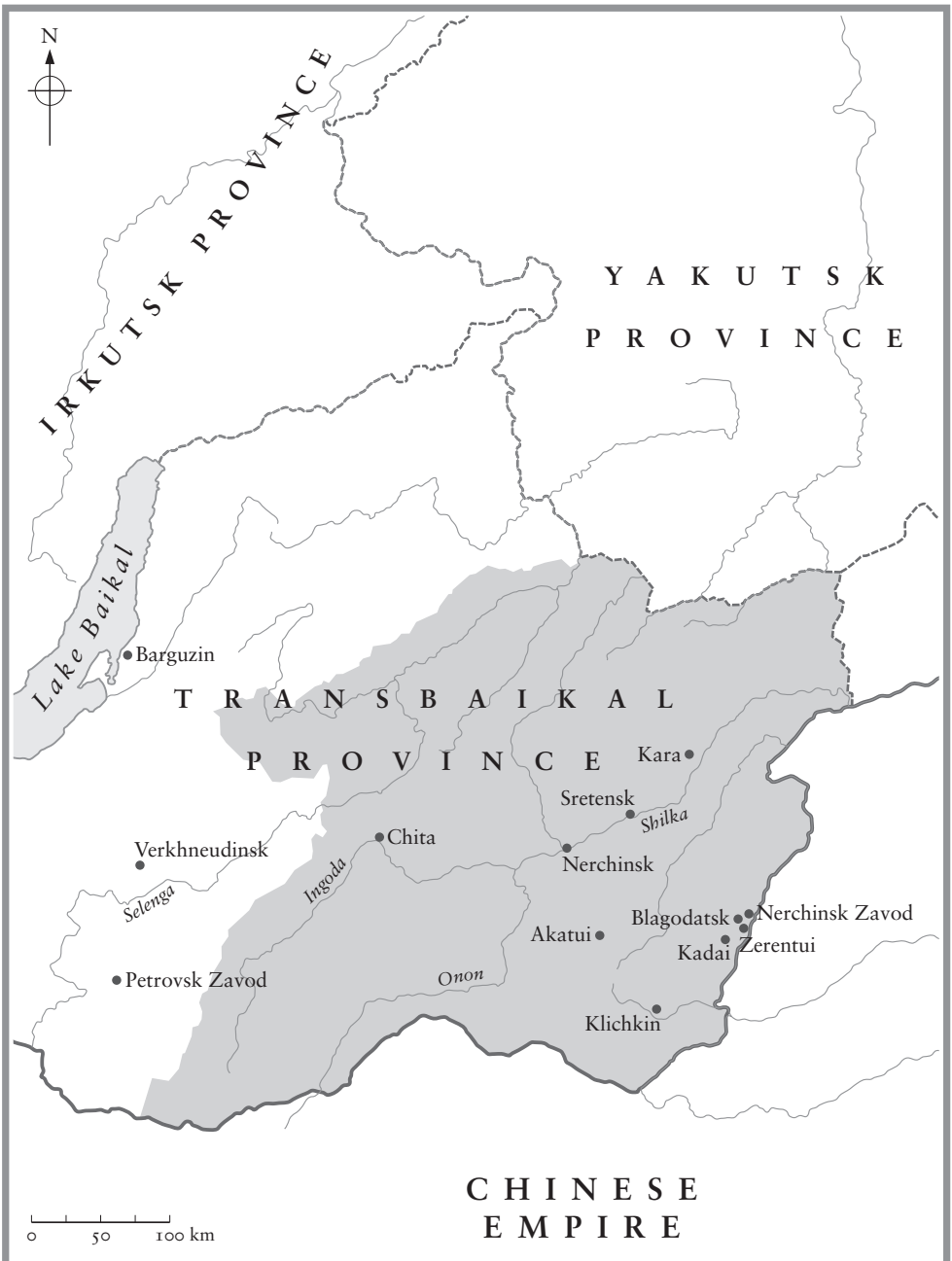

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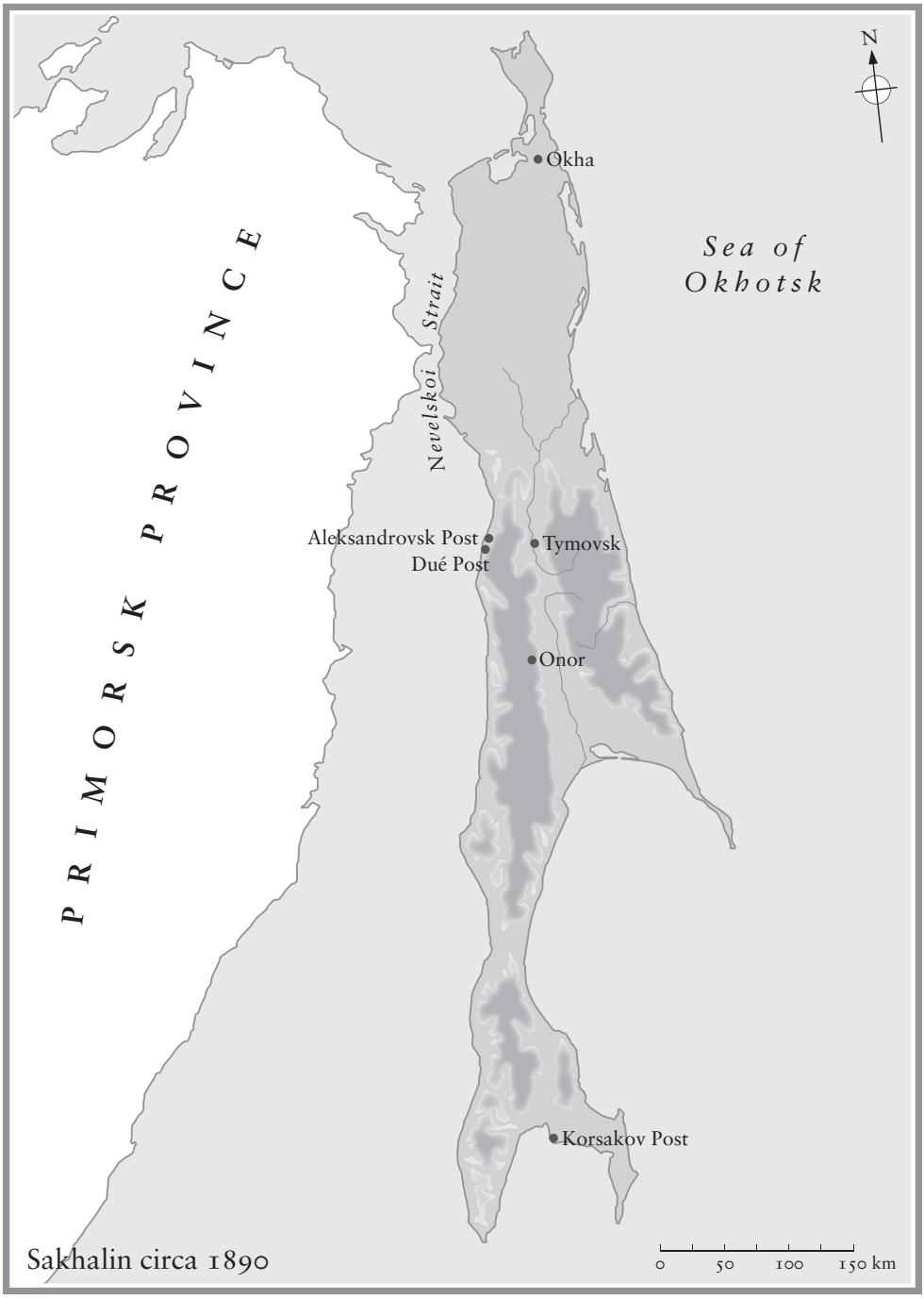

Sakhalin circa 1890

Author's Note

Transliteration from the Russian in the notes conforms to the standard system adopted by the Library of Congress. The main text amends this system for the Anglophone reader: 'soft signs' are omitted; surnames ending in 'ii' and 'yi' are standardized to 'y'; 'e' is rendered as 'ye' when appropriate, and so on. The names of Russian emperors, empresses and famous writers are given in their commonly Anglicized form.

Whenever possible, non-Russian (usually Polish) names have been restored to their original Latinate form. As it was not always possible to infer the original name from the Russian-language sources, such names sometimes appear in their Russified form. For any errors in this process, I apologize.

In the interest of allowing readers to consult the original sources, the book cites widely available translations of major Russian texts whenever possible. All other translations from the Russian are the author's own.

Throughout the text all weights and measurements have been converted from the Russian imperial system to the metric system both in the original Russian sources and in the English translations cited. Modifications to existing English translations are noted.

From 1700 to February 1918, Russia used the Julian calendar, which was between eleven and thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar. Dates are given according to the Julian calendar.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF SIBERIA

Between 1803 and 1822, all Siberia was under the authority of a single governor-general based in Irkutsk. In 1822, Siberia was divided into two principal administrative territories: a governorate-general of Western Siberia based in Omsk, and a governorate-general of Eastern Siberia based in Irkutsk. Each of these governorates-general was run by a governor-general who answered to St Petersburg and oversaw the governors of individual provinces. The Western Siberian governorate-general comprised Tobolsk, Tomsk and Omsk provinces (the latter was subsequently dissolved, partly merged into Tobolsk province and partly subdivided into the two new provinces of Semipalatinsk and Akmolynsk); the Eastern Siberian governorate-general comprised Irkutsk, Yenisei, Yakutsk and Transbaikal provinces. Each province (*guberniia* or *oblast'*) had an administrative capital and comprised a number of districts (*uezd*), and each district comprised a number of cantons (*volost'*). Some regions (*okrug*), such as the Nerchinsk Mining Region, stood outside of this hierarchy and were ruled by a senior official responsible directly to the tsar. In 1882, the Western Siberian governorate-general was abolished, Tomsk and Tobolsk provinces were placed under the direct control of the central government and Semipalatinsk and Akmolynsk provinces formed the new governorate-general of the Steppe. The Eastern Siberian governorate-general was subsequently subdivided into two new governorates-general: Priamursk, in 1884, and Irkutsk, in 1887. Priamursk administered the provinces of Transbaikal, Primorsk, the Amur and the island of Sakhalin; Irkutsk administered Yenisei, Irkutsk and Yakutsk provinces. Despite some further minor changes, these basic administrative units remained in place until 1917.

Here was a world all its own, unlike anything else; here were laws unto themselves, ways of dressing unto themselves, manners and customs unto themselves, a house of the living dead, a life unlike anywhere else, with distinct people unlike anyone else. It is this distinct corner that I am setting out to describe.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1862)[1]

The exile system played a central role in the colonization of Siberia. Towns grew up around Siberian penal forts and colonies to house their officials and military personnel. Rare was the Siberian village left untouched by the exiles who either officially settled almost every district in every Siberian province or unofficially roamed through them as itinerant labourers, thieves and beggars. Siberia's roads were dotted with the squat ochre waystations in which the marching convoys of deportees would overnight on their long and gruelling journey. The forwarding prisons, city jails, mines, industrial enterprises and exile settlements resembled sinews of state power that stretched eastwards from St Petersburg. When, in 1879, a devastating fire consumed three-quarters of the centre of Irkutsk – then a thriving city of 30,000 inhabitants – one of the few stone buildings to survive the flames was the central prison. Its significance as a major transit point for exiles was laid bare as it suddenly loomed above the smouldering ruins of the city.[5]

The Tobolsk Central Penal Labour Prison continued to serve as a penal institution until 1989, when the authorities finally shut it down. Like many of the tsarist-era prisons, it had been refurbished after 1917 and eventually become part of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn would call the 'archipelago' of penal facilities that formed the Stalinist Gulag. Both in Russia and abroad, the Gulag has overlaid memories of the tsars' use of Siberia as a place of punishment. Long before the Soviet state erected its camps, however, Siberia was already a vast open prison with a history spanning more than three centuries.[6]

Siberia – the Russian name *Сибирь* is pronounced *Seebeer* – dwarfs European Russia. At 15,500,000 square kilometres, it is one and a half times larger than the continent of Europe. Siberia has never had an independent political existence; it has no clear borders and no binding ethnic identity. Its modern history is inseparable from Russia's. The easily surmountable Ural Mountains have acted less as a physical boundary than as the imaginative and political frontier of a European Russia beyond which lay a giant Asiatic colony and a sprawling penal realm. Siberia was both Russia's heart of darkness and a world of opportunity and prosperity. The continent's bleak and unforgiving present was to give way to a brighter future, and Siberia's exiles were intended to play a key role in this vaunted transition.[7]

For the imperial state sought to do more than cage social and political disorder within its continental prison. By purging the old world of its undesirables, it would also populate the new. The exile system promised to harness a growing army of exiles in the service of a wider project to colonize Siberia. In theory, Russia's criminals would toil to harvest Siberia's natural riches and settle its remote territories and, in so doing, they would discover the virtues of self-reliance, abstinence and hard work. In practice, however, the exile system dispatched into the Siberian hinterland an army not of enterprising settlers but of destitute and desperate vagabonds. They survived not by their own industry but by stealing and begging from the real colonists, the Siberian peasantry. The tensions embedded in this dual status of 'prison colony' were never reconciled over the more than three centuries separating the banishment of the Uglichan insurgents and the implosion of the tsarist empire in 1917. Contrary to the ambitions of Russia's rulers, penal colonization never became a driving force behind Siberia's development. Rather, as the numbers of exiles grew, it became an ever greater obstacle to it.

Over the nineteenth century, the scale and intensity of Siberian exile increased so significantly that it easily surpassed the exile systems of the British and French empires. The British transported around 160,000 convicts to Australia in the eight decades between 1787 and 1868; the French state meanwhile had a penal population of about 5,500 in its overseas colonies between 1860 and 1900. By contrast, between 1801 and 1917, more than 1 million tsarist subjects were banished to Siberia.[8]

Among those exiles were generations of revolutionaries from towns and cities in European Russia and Poland. Some fought for a liberal constitution, some for national independence and still others for a socialist utopia. Siberia became a desolate staging post in the overlapping histories of European republicanism and the Russian revolutionary movement. By the end of the nineteenth century, the tsarist government was deporting thousands of dedicated revolutionaries to prisons, mines and far-flung settlements in Siberia. Amid the isolation and claustrophobia, they bickered, plotted and published political tracts to inspire and to coordinate the revolutionary underground in Russia's major cities. Their dreams of impending

revolution, undiluted by the compromises of practical politics, filled the yawning Siberian skies. Siberia had become a gigantic laboratory of revolution and exile a rite of passage for the men and women who would one day rule Russia. When revolution finally erupted in 1905, these exiled radicals transformed Siberia's towns and villages into crucibles of violent struggle against the autocracy. Scaffolds were erected in the courtyards of prisons while, beyond their walls, warders were assassinated in the streets. No longer a quarantine against the contagions of revolution, Siberia had become a source of the infection.

The biographies and writings of a few luminaries dominate historical memory of Siberian exile before the Russian Revolution. Some, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Lenin, were themselves exiles; others, like Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy, penned vivid portraits of convict life in Siberia in their reportage and fiction. In 1861–2, amid the 'thaw' of Alexander II's Great Reforms, Dostoevsky published his acclaimed semi-autobiographical novel, the title of which is usually rendered in English as *Notes from the House of the Dead*, though the original Russian title translates more accurately as *Notes from the Dead House*, underlining Dostoevsky's belief that, whatever their crimes, the exiles ultimately fell victim to a brutal and dehumanizing prison system: a house of the dead.

Thereafter, the annual trickle of articles, memoirs and works of fiction on the exile system became a torrent that surged unabated through the final decades of the tsarist era. The Russian press carried anguished discussions of the horrors of the exile system and its disastrous consequences for Siberia itself. Other celebrated writers and artists followed in Dostoevsky's footsteps. In Chekhov's story *In Exile* (1892), the long years of banishment in Siberia have stripped an ageing ferryman of all compassion, hope and desire. The former exile is, his young companion exclaims, 'no longer alive, a stone, clay'.[9] By the time Ilya Repin painted his *Unexpected Return* in 1884, the hollowed-out stare of the gaunt young man entering his family's dining room and the confused and shocked reaction of his relatives needed no explanation. Each and every one of Repin's contemporaries understood that the scene depicted the homecoming of a political exile. Repin's painting belonged to a shared *imaginative*